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AUTHOR Abouzeid, Mary P.; Rosemary, Catherine A.
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ABSTRACT

A study focused on children's alphabet knowledge and name writing ability to investigate between-group differences. Subjects were 22 children (mean age 57 months) in a private preschool located in a suburban, predominantly upper-middle income area and 12 children (mean age 56 months) in a private, subsidized day care center situated in a metropolitan area within walking distance to low income neighborhoods. The performances of both groups of children were compared on two measures of alphabet knowledge: alphabet recitation and name writing. Results indicated that children in both groups varied similarly in their performance of alphabet recitations. Comparisons of the two groups on name writing revealed differences between the groups, although the two groups did not differ in terms of the ranges of name writing ability. Findings undermine the notion that early literacy knowledge is primarily a function of family income. Findings support the need for purposeful inclusion of literacy activities in preschool curricula. (Contains 24 references and three figures of data.) (RS)

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Mary P. Abouzeid
McGuffey Reading Center
University of Virginia
125 Ruffner Hall
405 Emmet Street
Charlottesville, VA 22901
(804) 982-5322

Catherine A. Rosemary
Curry School of Education
University of Virginia

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Knowledge Preschool-Age Children Bring to Literacy Tasks: The Importance of "Not Holding Back"

Many early childhood teachers have interpreted the tenets of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987) as "hands-off" to alphabet teaching and other teacher-directed literacy activities for four- and five-year olds. Others have argued that reading with children, reciting the alphabet, and drawing and writing are necessary experiences in preschools, particularly for those children who depend on preschools for their early school success (McGill-Franzen, 1992).

Over the past two decades, the national preschool participation rate of three- to five-year olds has increased--from 20% in 1970 to 44% in 1990 (Kahn, 1980; National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). This trend has raised concerns about the quality of preschool programs, including the need for developmentally appropriate curricula and practices (Bredekamp, 1987). In particular, provision for literacy experiences has become a focus in early childhood education and the topic of much debate.

Related Literature. Studies have established a strong relationship between early literacy experiences and learning to read (Adams, 1990; Durkin, 1966; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Specifically, the strong link between alphabet knowledge and learning to read has been well-documented (Chomsky, 1971; Durkin, 1966). Additional factors that predict early reading success include facility with rhyme and phonemic awareness (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Juel, Griffeth, & Gough, 1986), letter-sound associations (Ehri, 1985; Stanovich, 1986; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1987) and alphabet naming (Denckla & Rudel, 1976). Children's writing development has been examined from periods when children

produce scribbles to periods when their productions contain letter-like forms and eventually intact Roman letters (Clay, 1975; Genishi & Dyson, 1984; Hildreth, 1936; Lavine, 1977). These and other studies have implications for children who spend a greater portion of their waking hours in preschools rather than at home. Unlike previous generations of children who did not attend preschools and were taught the alphabet and were read to by their parents, many children today depend on preschools for these kind of literacy experiences.

Purpose. Early childhood educators face two major dilemmas: (a) knowing the appropriate literacy activities to provide for children, and (b) knowing the critical time for introducing them. Activities associated with alphabet recognition and writing are at the heart of these dilemmas. This study focused on children's alphabet knowledge and name writing ability. Our purpose was to investigate between-group differences, if any, on these literacy tasks.

Procedures. The literacy understandings of two preschool groups of children from the Southeast were explored. The first author conducted a study of an upper-middle income group in a private preschool located in the suburbs of a metropolitan city (population 90,000). The preschool served predominantly upper-middle income families. All of the children from the four-year old class (N = 22) were selected, 11 boys and 11 girls. Their mean age was 57 months. The second author conducted a study of a low income group in a private, subsidized day care center situated in a metropolitan area (population 40,000) within walking distance to low income neighborhoods. All of the children in the four-year old group (N = 12) were selected, six boys and six girls. The mean age was 56 months.

We easily established rapport with our respective groups of children. Children were assessed individually. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed afterward. We recorded our observations of the children's behaviors as they engaged in each task. The studies were conducted during the fall of the year.

Methods. The performance of both groups of children were compared on two measures of alphabet knowledge: alphabet recitation and name writing. Following the alphabet recitation task, the children were asked to write their names. Based on research linking family income level to children's literacy-related experiences (National Education Goals Panel, 1991; Orland, 1990), we hypothesized that the upper-middle income group would score higher than the low income group on the measures of alphabet recitation and name writing.

Transcriptions of the children's alphabet recitations were analyzed according to letter sequences (see Figure 1). One point was assigned for each: coherent sequence, letter out of sequence, redundant letter, and unintelligible sound. Ashley, for example, sang the letters, "a b c d e f g / next time won't you sing with me." Her recitation was assigned a score of "20", one point for the correctly sequenced chain of "a-g" and one point for each letter that was not voiced. For Roger who sang the letters "a-y", then voiced "o," and ended with "z," the recitation was assigned a score of three. For Jamia who sang the letters from start to finish correctly, the recitation was assigned a score of one. A lower score was interpreted as the child having had more practice in learning the alphabet song, and higher scores were interpreted as the child having had less practice in learning the alphabet song. The interrater reliability for the analysis was .95.

insert Figure 1 about here

We scored each name writing sample using the Hildreth progression of writing development (1936), depicted in Figure 2. Using this scale, we categorized each child's name writing sample according to seven levels of letter formation development: scribble (level 1), linear scribble (level 2), separate symbols (level 3), mock and correct letters (level 4), first name generally correct (level 5), consistent first name representation (level 6), and writing fluency (level 7). The interrater reliability was .84.

insert Figure 2 about here

Findings. On the measure of alphabet recitation, no statistically significant difference was found (t (20) = .8, p = .45) between the upper-middle income group (M = 6.1, SD = 6.4) and the low income group (M = 8.6, SD = 7.1). The standard deviations indicated that the children in each group demonstrated a wide variance in their practice in learning the alphabet song.

On the measure of name writing, the results indicated a statistically significant difference between the groups (t (19) = 3.5, p <.05). The upper-middle income group (M = 5.2, SD = .98) outperformed the low income group (M =

4.1, SD = .67). The mode of name writing productions for the upper-middle income group was 6 (consistent, regular first name representation) compared to the mode of 4 (mock and correct letters) for the name writing productions of the low income group. For both groups, the name writing production ratings fell between 3 and 6. This range suggests that both groups of children had advanced beyond the level of scribbles, and that most children were producing at least some letters in their names.

Discussion. Children in both groups varied similarly in their performance of alphabet recitations. Comparisons of the two groups on name writing revealed differences between the groups, although the two groups did not differ in terms of the ranges of name writing ability. These comparisons underline the need to examine closely the performance of children on literacy tasks rather than conclude that certain groups classified by family income outperform others on certain literacy measures.

Although the small sample sizes limits the generalizability of the findings, the comparison of the two groups on alphabet recitation and name writing helps to undermine the notion that early literacy knowledge is primarily a function of family income. Our findings support previous research linking literacy acquisition with literacy experiences in the home (Hess, Holloway, Dickson, & Price, 1984; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Children in both groups demonstrated some level of understanding on each of the tasks. Given that the study was conducted when the children were only four-years old, we can presume that the variance in their performance is linked to their parents' provision of literacy experiences. Other explanations fall within the realm of intra-individual differences. Although these explanations lie outside the parameters of this research, they relate to our concern--that provision for

literacy experiences in preschool programs is essential.

This concern is echoed by preschool teachers who see large differences in four year old children's levels of literacy understandings. In the name of "developmentally appropriate," many preschool teachers withhold print experiences from all children in their classes because some are perceived as "not ready" for literacy tasks. Others, specifically Kindergarten teachers, often rely on the "letter-a-week tradition" (Reutzel, 1992) for all children, although some children are writing with invented spellings and others cannot write their names. Practices along either of these lines--withholding or teaching all the same thing, do not acknowledge that each child brings some degree of understanding to literacy tasks.

This study supports the need for purposeful inclusion of literacy activities in preschool curricula. We do not advocate a skills package program or the teaching of phonics in isolation; rather, we support the use of integrated literacy experiences with appropriate language-based activities. Figure 3 depicts a record form that practitioners could use to record direct observations of children's writing as they engage in such informal literacy activities. These activities could include many opportunities for literacy through play (Roskos & Vukelich, 1991), name writing as a window to alphabet instruction, drawing and labelling using invented spellings (Genishi & Dyson, 1984), and real life reasons for literacy (e.g., pretend-writing letters, telephone messages, grocery lists).

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insert Figure 3 about here

Conclusion. The time to engage children in literacy experiences begins at birth. As more children spend the greater part of their waking hours in preschools rather than at home being taught by their caretakers, preschools need to incorporate daily the kind of literacy experiences children of earlier generations received informally at home. Preschool teachers need to become aware of the knowledge preschool-age children bring to literacy tasks and not hold back the kinds of print-rich experiences that foster literacy development.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Sample analysis of alphabet recitation task.

Figure 2. Comparison of writing samples using Hildreth's writing progression.

Figure 3. Sample record form for observations of writing.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Sample analysis of alphabet recitation task.

Figure 2. Comparison of writing samples using Hildreth's writing progression.

Figure 3. Sample record form for observations of writing.

TOP

Child	Recitation	Run Score
Ashley	*A-B-C-D-E-F-G/ next time won't you sing with me* <-------1------->[H- I- J- K- L- M- N- O- P- Q- R- S- T- U- V- W- X- Y- Z] 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20	20
Roger	*A-B-C-D-E-F-G-/H-I-J-K/L-M-N-O-P/Q-R-S/T-U-V/W-X And Y-/ O/ Z/* <----------1----------> 2 3 *now I know my ABC's/next time won't you sing with me*	3
Jamia	*A-B-C-D-E-F-G/H-I-J-K-L-M-N-O-P/Q-R-S/T-U-V/W-X and Y And Z/* <----------1----------> *now I know my ABC/next time won't you sing with me*	1

TOP

Low Upper-Middle

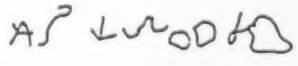
Level 1
scribble

Nancy

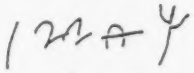
Level 2
linear scribble

David

Level 3
separate symbols



Mary



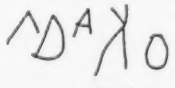
Ashley

Zack

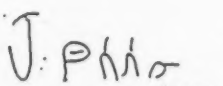
Level 4
mock & correct letters

BBBBIC

Bobbie



Kody



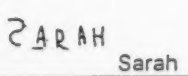
Jenna

Level 5
first name generally correct;
some omissions & reversals

HELEN

Helen

Marcus

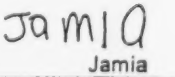


Sarah

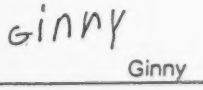
Level 6
consistent, regular first
name representation

JACK

Jack

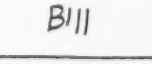


Jamia



Ginny

Level 7
writing fluency; last
name may be included



Bill

Observation of Writing During Play Activities

Child's Name _____ Date/Time_____
Play Center _____

Observe the child for at least ten minutes while the child is engaged in writing activities. Record your observations according to: (a) materials used; (b) others participating; and (c) dialogue relating to the child's purpose(s) for writing. Describe the writing sample using the categories listed below. Attach the writing sample (or copy) to this form.

Materials	Other Participants	Dialogue Who speaks to Whom	Nonverbal Behaviors

Description of Writing

Level 1 scribble	Level 2 linear scribble	Level 3 separate symbols	Level 4 mock & correct letters	Level 5 first name generally correct; some omissions & reversals	Level 6 consistent, regular first name representation	Level 7 writing fluency; last name may be included

(Adapted from Genishi & Dyson, 1986; Hildreth, 1936)